

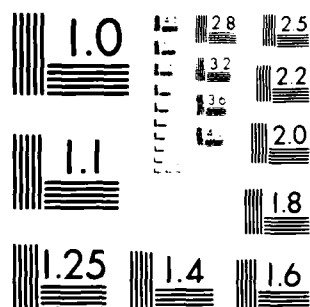
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PROSPECTS FOR SOVIET POLICY TOWARD CHINA

Harry Gelman

September 1983

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PROSPECTS FOR SOVIET POLICY TOWARD CHINA¹

Harry Gelman

The Contending Perspectives in Moscow

Mr. Chairman, I would begin with one central observation about Soviet policy at this moment. Today, in mid-1983, nine months into the new Andropov regime and almost seven years since Mao Zedong left the scene, two tendencies are visibly contending for predominance in Soviet policy toward China. One current of opinion, which I consider much the weaker of the two, favors more active Soviet steps to conciliate the PRC in order to try to expand the modest areas of improvement in Sino-Soviet relations that have emerged since 1981, and, if possible, to permanently redirect Chinese fears and hostility away from the Soviet Union and toward the United States. The other current, which at present seems to me to have considerably greater strength in Moscow, also would like to see a meaningful Sino-Soviet rapprochement, but is highly skeptical that this can be achieved and most reluctant to make significant concessions to Beijing without far-fetching prior Chinese concessions. Above all, those who support this latter tendency appear to be unwilling to sacrifice the concrete geopolitical advantages around China's periphery which Soviet military power achieved in the 1970s at China's expense.

¹This text is a prepared statement presented in testimony before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the U.S. House of Representatives on August 2, 1983. The views expressed in this statement are those of the author alone and are not necessarily shared by The Rand Corporation or any of its research sponsors.

As a result, Sino-Soviet relations now exist simultaneously on two widely divergent tracks. On secondary matters, there continues to be gradual progress; on major matters, there remains a total impasse.

On the one hand, the Soviets and the Chinese both see it as in their interests to continue to pursue a series of slow, step-by-step improvements in certain aspects of their state-to-state relations, particularly in the spheres of economics, sports, and culture. The Soviets sought such improvements immediately after Mao's death, and the Chinese allowed them to begin in 1979 and to acquire new impetus since 1981. This process has reduced tension between the two powers and has cumulatively imparted a certain civility and normality to the relationship. But Chinese intercourse with the Soviet Union, in the economic and every other sphere, is still much more restricted in scope than even American dealings with the USSR.

Meanwhile, side by side with this, on the second track an intense conflict of national interest persists between Beijing and Moscow. The Andropov leadership has thus far preserved intact those Brezhnev policies in Asia--regarding the Soviet military buildup along the Sino-Soviet border, Soviet troop dispositions in Mongolia, Soviet strategic deployments of the Backfire bomber and the SS-20, Soviet support for the Vietnamese conquest of Cambodia, Soviet naval presence at Cam Ranh Bay, and Soviet military efforts to enforce their domination of Afghanistan--which the Chinese regard as grave attacks on their interests or threats to their security. On the whole, the momentum behind this general pattern of Soviet behavior seems quite impressive, and I believe the Chinese are growing increasingly pessimistic that it will soon change.

The Dual Nature of Soviet Policy

This duality in Soviet policy toward China--the desire, on the one hand, to improve relations with Beijing, and the determination, on the other hand, to press Soviet interests that conflict with Beijing's--has been characteristic

of Soviet behavior for many years. Throughout the evolution of the Sino-Soviet dispute, a clash of underlying national interests has been a vital factor in the growth of the conflict, changing and broadening and becoming more visible as the years went on.

To be sure, in the early years of the dispute this factor was interwoven with others, notably the personal struggle between Mao and Khrushchev and the ideological clash between Khrushchev's reformism and Mao's fanaticism. But even in the 1950s and early 1960s, when the Sino-Soviet arguments seemed esoteric and the main arena of the dispute was the international Communist movement, the focus of the struggle was over the authority to determine whose national interests--Moscow's or Beijing's--should be accorded greater weight in the formulation of Communist policy.

It should be remembered that the willingness of Stalin's heirs to sacrifice concrete Soviet interests to propitiate the Chinese rapidly dwindled when it became apparent that China could not be harnessed to Soviet purposes. The early Soviet return of Port Arthur and Dairen to China, and the assistance originally given to the Chinese economy and to Chinese military capabilities, were thus eventually followed by the Soviet effort to control Chinese behavior by demanding establishment of a "joint fleet" dominated by Moscow, by the Soviet refusal to give the atomic weapon to China, and by the punitive withdrawal of Soviet experts from the PRC.

All this is worth recalling now because to some extent, the memory of these events a quarter-century ago still conditions the attitudes of both sides even today. On the Soviet side, it reinforces the attitude of those--notably in the military--who tend to be most reluctant to give up existing Soviet geopolitical advantages in Asia for the sake of a conjectural future payoff in Chinese goodwill. On the Chinese side, the memory of the past

remains an ongoing lesson in Soviet perfidy toward China, and a warning against over-optimism in dealing with the present Soviet leaders.

Soviet Motives for the Far East Buildup²

It is primarily since 1965 that the Sino-Soviet rivalry has been militarized. One of the major legacies of the Brezhnev regime has been the long-term buildup of Soviet forces confronting China, a process which began early in the Brezhnev era and has continued methodically to the present day, in tandem with the growth of Soviet strategic forces deployed against the United States. Khrushchev's successors began this Asian buildup when they decided that Khrushchev's removal had not altered Mao's hostility toward the Soviet Union and that they faced a serious Chinese challenge to the legitimacy of Soviet borders with the PRC. They resolved to undertake a permanent strengthening of their position in the Far East, both to ensure their hold on the frontiers they claimed and, more broadly, to create the means to exert pressure on China. They have come to regard the tank forces they have stationed in Mongolia, threatening the north China plain, as a key element in this pressure. In sum, they have been determined to create and maintain a continuously updated decisive advantage in firepower facing China at every step up the potential ladder of escalation, with the criterion for sufficiency heavily influenced by the need to compensate for dependence on a long and vulnerable rail line for reinforcement. All these considerations were strengthened by the Soviet experience in 1969, when the USSR had a long series of border clashes with China, and then further strengthened by the adamant position upheld by Beijing in the border negotiations conducted between 1969 and 1978.

²See Harry Gelman, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-Taking Against China*, R-2943-AF, August 1982, The Rand Corporation, Santa Monica.

While this initial Soviet motive for the buildup--to deter and overawe China--endures, over the last decade it has been supplemented by additional motives.

First, the Soviets have also come increasingly to rely on their force dispositions to China's *north* to inhibit China's response to the military initiatives of the Soviets or their clients to China's *south*. The Soviets first discovered this collateral benefit of their Far East buildup during the India-Pakistan war of 1971, when the U.S. feared that the PRC would come to Pakistan's aid despite Soviet support for India, precipitating a Sino-Soviet conflict. This did not happen, and the Soviet leaders are likely to have concluded that Beijing was effectively deterred by the threat to the north.

This conclusion was reinforced in late 1978 and early 1979, when Vietnam launched its blitzkrieg into Cambodia after signing a treaty with the USSR that was obviously intended to deter China. Although the PRC responded in February-March 1979 with a punitive temporary and shallow incursion into Vietnam, the Chinese in effect conceded that they believed a more meaningful, far-reaching and long-lived threat to Hanoi--an attack which seriously attempted to force Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia--would entail unacceptable risks of a Soviet military response to the north. The Soviets have extracted concrete geopolitical benefits in return for providing this deterrent and other services to Hanoi.

Secondly, since 1978 the Soviets have been concerned to ensure that their strength in the Far East sufficed to insure a continued Soviet advantage in this arena in the event of the evolution of military cooperation between the United States, China, and Japan. Partly for this reason, over the past five years the Soviet Far East buildup has been revitalized. A high command

has been established for Soviet forces in the three eastern military districts and Mongolia, in effect formalizing Soviet acceptance of the need for a permanent, self-sufficient, and very large military presence in the area. There has been some tendency toward more forward deployment of forces facing the Soviet Union's neighbors--deployments in Mongolia, in the case of China, and in the Japanese "Northern Territories" (the southernmost Kuriles) in the case of Japan. Over the same period, the Soviet Union has made more visible to China and Japan, through the increasing deployment of the Backfire bomber and the SS-20 missile, the threat of strategic weapons of mass destruction. These trends in Soviet military policy in the Far East are clearly intended to intimidate, and have not been halted despite the dwindling of the ephemeral prospect of Sino-Japanese-U.S. joint military collaboration against the Soviet Union. As in Europe, the Soviet Union continues to count on the pressure created by its growing strength to inhibit the response of its adversaries.

Finally, by the time of Andropov's advent to power in November 1982, Soviet policy toward China had also become intertwined with Soviet efforts to consolidate a series of advanced positions staked out through the use of Soviet military power in Asia during the 1970s. In the nine months since Andropov took office, the Chinese have seen little change in the thrust of these Soviet efforts.

In Afghanistan, the PRC perceives an ongoing Soviet punitive war aimed at perpetuating Soviet military control of a country on China's western frontier. The Chinese are scornful of the motives underlying Soviet conversations with Pakistan on the Afghan issue, regarding this as an attempt to separate Pakistan from support of the Afghan rebellion without sacrificing the essence of Soviet domination of Afghanistan.

More important to China than relatively distant Afghanistan is Indochina, where Soviet policy supports Vietnam's military efforts to consolidate its domination over the peninsula and to exclude Chinese influence from a region Beijing has long regarded as essential to its interests. Vietnam is determined to maintain its control over Cambodia, and China is determined to break it; despite some political posturing by both sides, neither really believes these conflicting goals to be compromisable. Meanwhile, in return for Soviet services to Vietnam, Soviet political influence has followed in the wake of Vietnam into Cambodia and Laos and the Soviet Union has secured use of Cam Ranh Bay to support growing naval operations on China's southeastern flank. Soviet military authorities apparently value these military privileges highly, and would be extremely loath to give them up.

Since Andropov came to power, despite some ongoing Soviet friction with Hanoi, and despite evident Vietnamese initial fears that the Soviets might betray them for the sake of improving relations with China, this has not happened. The Soviets probably believe that only truly drastic Soviet pressures on Hanoi might possibly bring sufficient Vietnamese concessions to satisfy Beijing, and that the attempted use of such pressures would in the meantime gravely endanger the Soviet relationship with Vietnam and the Soviet presence in Cam Ranh Bay. To run political risks of this magnitude, the Soviets apparently want commensurate payment in advance from Beijing. Thus far, the Soviets have been unwilling to risk losing the bird in the hand--their present advantages in Indochina--for the uncertainties of the bird in the bush--hypothetical Chinese gratitude. The inertia created by existing Soviet geopolitical advantages thus continues to dominate Soviet policy in Indochina, and to perpetuate Chinese resentment.

The Question of Soviet Troop Dispositions

Most important of all is Soviet policy in the north, where the new Andropov regime has thus far been unwilling to make any concessions regarding the disposition of Soviet troops facing China. In the fall of 1982, the Soviets had dropped a number of public and private hints that they might eventually do so, and Brezhnev shortly before his death had made an allusion to China in an address to military leaders which was also interpreted by many observers as implying the possibility of eventual Soviet conciliatory steps. Since then, however, the Chinese have apparently found, in the two sessions of bilateral talks they have held with the Soviets, that the Soviet leadership has not been prepared to follow through on these hints. The Chinese are evidently particularly disturbed at the Soviet refusal thus far to discuss Soviet forces in Mongolia, which the Chinese see as the most threatening aspect of the Soviet military posture. From the Soviet perspective, as already suggested, these force dispositions in the north are intimately connected with Soviet ambitions in the south. The Soviet forces in Mongolia are, among other things, an instrument of pressure to ensure that China is permanently deterred from intervening in force in response to Vietnam's operations in Indochina. In addition to all other considerations, it is thus quite difficult for the Soviet leaders to be seen making concessions to China regarding forces in the north while fighting continues in Indochina and tension prevails between Vietnam and the PRC.

The Soviets have replied to Chinese demands regarding their forces in Mongolia by asserting that this issue concerns a "third country," and that Beijing can only discuss this with Ulan Bator. From the Chinese perspective, this reply is hypocritical, since the Mongolian regime, unlike Hanoi, is in fact a Soviet satellite obedient to Soviet wishes. In this context, the

Chinese probably regard as ominous the recent Mongolian expulsion of some Chinese nationals. While good evidence is lacking, one explanation for Mongolian conduct which the Chinese may favor is that the Soviet Union has instructed Tsedenbal to create new bilateral friction between Mongolia and the PRC as a pretext to justify continued Soviet intransigence regarding Soviet forces in the country.

The Intractable Border Issue

The present Soviet posture, in short, is one of waiting for major Chinese concessions before agreeing to reciprocal Soviet concessions. While one can only speculate as to what the Soviets require from the Chinese, one possibility is a further reduction of existing Chinese security cooperation with the United States. Another is a firm indication of Chinese willingness to settle existing border claims against the Soviet Union.

Although the Chinese have not highlighted these claims in recent years, they have apparently maintained them intact. As spelled out in the years of border negotiations in the 1970s, these involve territories which the PRC claims Russia and the Soviet Union have seized *in addition* to the territory given Moscow in a series of "unequal treaties" signed in the 19th century. For the most part, this consists of islands in the border rivers in the east, and a large tract in the Pamir mountains in the west. The Chinese for years have demanded that the USSR evacuate every inch of the territory the Chinese define as being in dispute, prior to demarcation of an agreed frontier. It is this demand, in particular, which Moscow wishes Beijing to abandon. While rejecting it, the Soviets have over the years frequently offered China, instead, palliatives such as a nonaggression pact, which Beijing has invariably spurned. The recent Soviet reiteration of the offer of such a pact is thus not regarded by China as a Soviet concession.

On the whole, the border issue has been intractable to date because the Chinese negotiating position has been interwoven with the much broader Chinese geopolitical struggle against the Soviet Union. The Soviets may hope that given enough time, and given a relaxation of Chinese overall attitudes toward the USSR, Beijing may finally change its position and accommodate to Soviet wishes.

The Soviet View of the Internal Chinese Scene

The Soviets today, as often in the past, are making vigorous efforts to appeal to elements in the Chinese elite they think the most likely to wish to conciliate the Soviet Union. Although Soviet hopes in this regard were frequently frustrated in Mao's lifetime, since Mao's death in 1976 many Soviet specialists on China have drawn renewed encouragement from the increased Chinese civility in state-to-state relations, from the disappearance of Chinese ideological charges against the Soviet Union, from the rehabilitation of some older Chinese cadres who in the past had favored a more moderate Chinese attitude toward the USSR, and from the evident divisions within the Chinese elite. They see grounds for hope in the similarities between the Chinese and Soviet social systems and state structures and in the resentment shown by some Chinese leaders over what they regard as the subversive effect of Western influence upon their control over the Chinese population.

Finally, the Soviets have for many years believed that there are hidden elements in the Chinese armed forces with attitudes that may be exploitable for Soviet interests, and they continue today to strive to tap into such sentiment in the PLA. They maintain for this purpose a clandestine radio--Radio Ba Yi ("August First"--founding date of the PLA)--broadcasting from the Soviet Far East but purporting to emanate from China and to represent a Chinese faction. This radio has in the past violently attacked Deng Xiaoping and other Chinese leaders; although these personal attacks have now been softened for the time being, the

Chinese leadership certainly regards Radio Ba Yi as another in a long series of Soviet attempts to interfere in Chinese internal affairs. This perception is not likely to predispose Deng to wish to make further concessions to Moscow.

In general, the societal factors in China that give Soviet specialists hope, while real enough, are thus far more than counterbalanced by the fact that most Chinese continue to believe, as the Chinese Premier recently reiterated, that the Soviet Union continues to pose a grave threat to Chinese security interests around the Chinese periphery.

Soviet Hopes for the Economic Relationship

The Soviets have also for many years sought to get the Chinese to agree to a major expansion of the economic relationship--drastically cut back by the PRC since the 1960s--in the belief that this would help promote the gradual restoration of some Soviet influence in China. To this end, on a number of occasions in the past they have also made specific offers of technological assistance to China, notably in the fields of coal mining, nonferrous metallurgy, and oil development. The last identifiable such Soviet proposal was made many years ago; it is not known whether the Soviets have privately revived any such concrete offer in recent years. Nor is it clear whether the Chinese would accept, in view of their memory of the abrupt withdrawal of the Soviet experts in 1960 and Beijing's traditional resistance to the large-scale return of such agents of Soviet influence or to renewed dependence on the USSR. It is likely that the Chinese response, should the Soviets ever reiterate such an offer, would be conditioned by the nature, scope, and economic relevance of the proposal. It is noteworthy that in one area in which the Soviets have offered technological help in the past--oil exploitation--the USSR no longer has a significant technological advantage over China.

On the purely trading side of the relationship, the Soviets undoubtedly consider that they have made a major advance with the recent Chinese consent to more than double total turnover this year to some \$800 million. From the Soviet perspective, this is the most important result yet to emerge from the otherwise marginal recent advances in state-to-state dealings. The Soviets for many years have hoped that the Chinese would eventually be enticed by a desire to secure spare parts and machinery for the large segment of the Chinese industrial base originally built with Soviet help in the 1950s. More recently, the Soviets have reckoned on a Chinese desire to secure some middle-level Soviet technology more easily assimilated by the Chinese economy than the advanced technology Beijing has bought from the West and Japan. These considerations, along with a PRC desire to conserve hard currency and to diversify its sources of supply, may well contribute to a continued growth of Sino-Soviet trade over the next few years, particularly if total Chinese foreign trade continues to expand. But the growth of Soviet exports to China will continue to be conditioned by Soviet readiness to accept an equal value of Chinese exports every year, since for political reasons the Chinese will accept no imbalances in each year's trading account with the Soviet Union.

Considered more broadly, Sino-Soviet trade today remains only a fairly small fraction of Sino-U.S., let alone Sino-Japanese trade, and this central fact is not likely to change. The PRC is unlikely to abandon its primary reliance upon the capitalist industrialized world for inputs to China's modernization, and the Soviet Union will almost certainly remain a secondary factor in this process. The political advantages the Soviets can extract from the growth of their economic relationship with Beijing will therefore probably remain rather limited.

The Sino-American Factor

Soviet conduct strongly implies a belief that Soviet chances of securing further significant concessions from China will be heavily influenced by the future course of Sino-American relations, and that the USSR has a vested interest in the deterioration of those relations. The Soviet leaders thus obviously believe that the growth of Sino-U.S. friction over the Taiwan issue under the Reagan administration was one important factor that impelled Beijing since 1981 to allow some improvements in Sino-Soviet state-to-state dealings even though the Soviet Union has not yet made any of the geopolitical concessions to China which the PRC had previously posed as prerequisites to any such improvements. Soviet propaganda statements, from those of Brezhnev on down, have transparently sought to appeal to Chinese grievances over Taiwan. They have attempted to convince Beijing that those grievances are more important for Chinese interests than the Soviet forces on the Sino-Soviet border or Soviet behavior in Indochina and Afghanistan. They seek to play upon Chinese resentment of the assertions of some Americans that China is dependent on the United States.

At the same time, the dominant forces in the Soviet elite also appear to believe that Soviet intimidation has played a significant role in securing a modification in Beijing's posture toward Moscow since 1981. As they do in Europe, the Soviets seek both to deny the existence of a Soviet threat to China and paradoxically to encourage a tendency to propitiate Moscow to mitigate the danger created by the threat. The Soviets are well aware of the concerns created in Beijing by the emergence of a two-front confrontation with the USSR and its Vietnamese ally since 1979. They are equally aware of the PRC's grave weaknesses in military technology and of the desire of the Chinese leadership to limit the diversion to military spending of resources

desperately needed for China's economic development. They therefore probably believe that the Chinese decision to permit some improvement in state-to-state relations with Moscow was in large part a move to ease the tensions and reduce the danger created by China's relative weakness and by the Soviet Union's geopolitical hold over China. From the perspective of many in Moscow, however, this Chinese motive is, itself, one good reason to maintain the existing pressure on Beijing, and to make no unilateral concessions.

The dominant forces in the Soviet elite are also apparently intensely suspicious of Chinese intentions and, in particular, of Deng Xiaoping, whom they have known, disliked, and fought against for a long time. They are now likely to believe that one of the factors underlying Chinese behavior toward the USSR over the last two years has been a tactical Chinese desire to use Chinese dealings with Moscow to exert tacit pressure on the United States for bilateral concessions within an overall framework of continued resistance to Soviet policy by both powers. Although they note--and welcome--Chinese criticisms of the United States and the cessation of Chinese calls for a "world united front" against the Soviet Union, they remain highly skeptical of Chinese assertions intended to imply equidistance between the Soviet Union and the United States. They are vividly aware of the extent to which their broad interests and ambitions clash permanently with China's in Asia, of the fact that the United States and the PRC continue to work in parallel to oppose Soviet policy in Indochina and Afghanistan, of the fact that more concrete forms of U.S.-PRC security cooperation evidently continue to exist, of the fact that the PRC continues to seek broader access to U.S. technology with military applications for defense against the Soviet Union, and of the reports that the U.S. Secretary of Defense has now been invited to visit China. It will therefore seem obvious to the Soviet leadership that despite

the many areas of bilateral Sino-U.S. friction, China thus far is still not equidistant; on the contrary, it continues to lean to one side, in fact if not in name. This perception is also likely to reinforce the arguments of those in Moscow who are particularly inclined to maintain an adamant position on the central issues raised in the Sino-Soviet talks.

In sum, for the time being the consensus in Moscow appears to be inclined to stand pat, and to hope that time will work in the USSR's favor. Although some new symbolic Soviet gesture toward the Chinese is still conceivable, the trend of thought in Moscow that favors important unilateral concessions appears to be outweighed by the tendency that does not. The first viewpoint may be influential among some academic China specialists; the second seems likely to be particularly strong among the ideologues of the Central Committee apparatus and within the Soviet military. Meanwhile, Soviets of all persuasions are hoping that the process of slow state-to-state improvements, and the growth of economic and cultural intercourse, will gradually change Chinese international priorities. They hope also that heightened Sino-American frictions over Taiwan may in time incline Beijing to take further steps to conciliate the Soviet Union. Finally, they probably have now begun to await the death of Deng as they once awaited the death of Mao, counting on favorable changes to emerge from the maelstrom of Chinese politics once the man they consider their key opponent has departed the scene.

Implications for the United States

Given the incendiary potential of the present constellation of forces in the Far East and the extent of overall Soviet-American tension worldwide, the modest improvements in Sino-Soviet relations that have taken place in the last two years, by reducing the likelihood of Sino-Soviet conflict that might spread to involve the United States, have somewhat improved the prospects

for stability in the region, a fact which itself can only be welcome to the United States. At the same time, despite some protestations to the contrary, the Soviets clearly tie their hopes for more meaningful improvements with China to hopes for a radical degeneration of Sino-American relations, and thus seek a significant improvement in their position in the Sino-Soviet-U.S. triangle at the expense of the United States. Such a change would be quite harmful to U.S. interests.

A shift of this kind now still seems unlikely, primarily because of the assertive dynamism of Soviet foreign policy, which continues to press against Chinese interests around the Chinese periphery in much the same way that it presses against the positions of Japan, the United States, and a variety of other U.S. allies in Asia and other parts of the world. The Soviets are now seeking to consolidate military advances made at the expense of their rivals in the 1970s in Afghanistan and Indochina, and simultaneously to overcome the adverse political reaction--in China and many other states--without abandoning those gains. At the same time, they steadily augment the military power with which they seek to intimidate their opponents on all sides, including China. Given these circumstances, it is in the U.S. interest to so conduct its policy toward the PRC as to encourage the Chinese propensity to resist, rather than accommodate to Soviet pressure.